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# The paradox of pursuing happiness

Felicia K Zerwas<sup>1</sup> and Brett Q Ford<sup>2</sup>

Most people want to feel happy; however, some evidence suggests that the *more* people value happiness, the *less* happy they are. To make sense of this paradox, we leverage existing models of goal pursuit to identify core components of the *process* of pursuing happiness, highlighting how each of these components may go awry. Then, we introduce two fundamental *traits* that put pressure on the core components of the *process* and in turn further influence the outcome of pursuing happiness. Together, this nuanced approach to the pursuit of happiness across levels of analysis helps us organize existing literature and make better predictions about when, why, and for whom the pursuit of happiness may backfire and when it is likely to succeed.

## Addresses

<sup>1</sup> University of California, Berkeley, United States

<sup>2</sup> University of Toronto, Canada

Corresponding author: Zerwas, Felicia K ([fzerwas@berkeley.edu](mailto:fzerwas@berkeley.edu))

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Despite a common ethos that happiness is good for you, much evidence suggests that valuing happiness to an extreme degree can backfire such that the *more* people value happiness, the *less* happy they are. However, people can indeed successfully pursue happiness (cf., Refs. [1<sup>•</sup>, 2, 3]). To understand the promise and pitfalls of pursuing happiness, we start by reviewing the literature establishing that people who value happiness the most are often the least likely to achieve it. To unravel this paradox, we propose it is useful to consider the pursuit of happiness at multiple levels of analysis. First, we consider the components that occur during the pursuit of happiness (i.e., the *process* of pursuing happiness) to identify where this pursuit could go awry. Next, we consider the individual differences in how people tend to approach this process (i.e., *traits* relevant to the pursuit of happiness) which put pressure on the core components of this process, and

powerfully shape the outcome of that pursuit. Taken together, this complementary approach across levels of analysis helps researchers make better predictions about when, why, and for whom the pursuit of happiness is most likely to backfire and when it might succeed.

## Extremely valuing happiness and related outcomes

Most people aim to feel happy [4] and typically, the more someone strives for a goal the more likely they are to reach it. However, this logic does not always apply to striving for happiness. Mounting evidence suggests that intensely valuing happiness predicts negative consequences in both the short term (e.g., less positive emotion) and the long term (e.g., worse well-being). Demonstrating the short-term costs of valuing happiness, an experiment found that individuals induced to value happiness more intensely — that is, who read a news article on the many benefits of feeling happy — experienced *lower* levels of positive emotion after watching a positive film clip compared to those in a control condition [5<sup>••</sup>]. Using a similar experimental paradigm, individuals induced to value happiness experienced greater levels of loneliness (both self-reported loneliness and a hormonal marker) after watching a film clip that activates intimacy and affiliation themes, compared to those in a control condition [6]. Altogether, these studies suggest that extremely valuing happiness negatively influences emotional experiences in the short term.

People who extremely value happiness are also less likely to attain long-term happiness as demonstrated by lower levels of psychological well-being and life satisfaction [5<sup>••</sup>, 7]. This pattern was especially strong for individuals experiencing low life stress, when happiness is supposedly most within reach [5<sup>••</sup>]. Furthermore, these people seem to be at risk for poor mental health, more broadly construed. Several studies have found that extremely valuing happiness is associated with greater depressive symptoms, whether assessed by clinicians [8], or reported by participants themselves [5<sup>••</sup>, 8, 9, 10<sup>•</sup>, 11, 12]. These mental health risks also extend over time: extremely valuing happiness predicted a more severe illness course in bipolar patients over a 12-month period (i.e., more manic episodes, even when accounting for initial symptom severity [13]).

Overall, it appears that wanting to feel happy to an intense degree does not necessarily translate to greater feelings of happiness in either the short term or the long term. This pattern suggests an unfortunate paradox where the more people want happiness, the less likely they are

to achieve it. However, a large body of research also suggests that many people are indeed able to successfully pursue happiness [1,2,3]. To make sense of these divergent patterns, we propose it is useful to closely examine the process of pursuing happiness as well as the traits that influence that process.

### The process of pursuing happiness: A cybernetic approach

We can leverage existing theoretical models of goal pursuit (i.e., cybernetic models; [14,15,16]) to identify key components of the process of pursuing happiness, which in turn highlight where this pursuit can go awry. Cybernetic models emphasize three components of goal pursuit: (1) a goal, (2) regulation to reduce mismatches between the current state and the goal, and (3) monitoring for ongoing mismatches between the current state and the goal. As depicted in Figure 1, we apply these components of goal pursuit specifically to the pursuit of happiness [17,18\*\*].

First, individuals set the happiness goal (e.g., a desire to feel happy). Second, they regulate their happiness by engaging in strategies to increase happiness if their current emotional state does not match their emotional goal (e.g., seeking out a positive situation to increase happiness). In line with common conceptualizations of emotion regulation [19,20], we consider emotion regulation to include any strategy

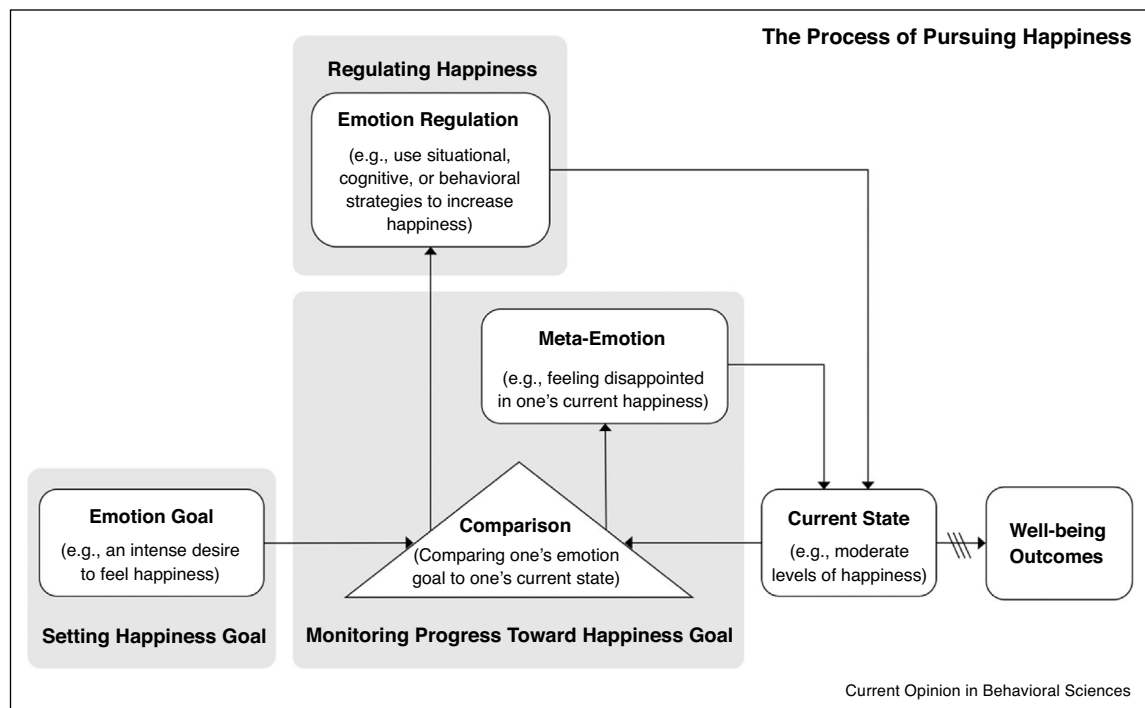
undertaken to change one's emotional state; these strategies might be situational (e.g., choosing to engage in specific activities or altering one's circumstances), attentional/cognitive (e.g., thinking about the situation differently), or behavioral (e.g., not expressing one's emotion).

Third, they monitor their progress toward the happiness goal they have set. The monitoring component is made up of two separate processes. One process involves a comparison between the desired state and the current state (e.g., not currently feeling as happy as desired), and another process involves a potential emotional reaction to that comparison process: a meta-emotion (e.g., feeling disappointed at one's current levels of happiness). As shown in Figure 1, the comparison process between the desired and current state is a necessary feature of goal pursuit. Conversely, meta-emotion is not a necessary feature of goal pursuit — individuals can pursue happiness *without* the experience of a meta-emotion (although if meta-emotions are experienced, they will also influence one's current state). Altogether, this process might make the pursuit of happiness seem straightforward, but each of these components are vulnerable to noteworthy complications that could make happiness less likely.

### How can setting a happiness goal go awry?

Happiness is a highly common goal for people across cultures [4,21–26]. However, setting a goal to feel happy

Figure 1



A cybernetic model of emotional goal pursuit (cf., Ref. [17]) applied to the pursuit of happiness. We emphasize three components of the process (highlighted in gray) where the pursuit can go awry: setting the happiness goal, regulating happiness, and monitoring progress toward the happiness goal.

can become problematic when the intensity or frequency of the happiness goal make it less likely people will be able to achieve the goal.

Having high expectations for the intensity of one's happiness can be detrimental by rendering the goal largely unreachable [27]. A field study nicely demonstrated this notion by finding that individuals with the biggest plans for their New Year's Eve celebrations were the least happy afterwards, compared to individuals who had low or no expectations for their plans [28\*\*]. Even when happiness is within reach, high standards can hinder individuals' ability to meet their goals.

Setting a happiness goal too frequently (i.e., trying to feel happy very often in daily life) might also backfire when it results in trying to feel happy in contexts where it is challenging to successfully achieve happiness [29–32]. Furthermore, trying to pursue happiness in moments that are not conducive to happiness might also mean forgoing other valued goals (e.g., protecting one's interests in a negotiation) and thus might also lead to less happiness overall. For example, individuals who tend to want to feel more happy in contexts where happiness is not conducive (e.g., a confrontational interaction) reported worse overall well-being [26], suggesting that such individuals tend to be unsuccessful at pursuing happiness. Overall, setting a goal to feel happiness is necessary to begin the pursuit of happiness [33,34], but there are multiple ways in which setting this goal does *not* set people up for success.

#### How can regulating happiness go awry?

Simply having the goal to feel happy will not always result in feeling happy [35]. Instead, as depicted in Figure 1, the ability to meet one's goal is dependent on the effectiveness of one's *emotion regulation* [10\*,12] — the strategies people use to manage and influence the emotions they experience and express [36]. Although many emotion regulation strategies can promote happiness (e.g., Refs. [1\*,36,37]), several lines of research indicate that people are not very accurate at knowing what strategies will bring them happiness or how to use those strategies most successfully [38].

People striving to feel happiness may not know which strategies would help them reach their happiness goals. For example, most people believe that spending money on oneself (versus someone else) should promote one's happiness but empirical research suggests the opposite: people who spend money on themselves are not as happy as those who spend it on other people [39,40].

Other research suggests that people who value happiness tend to use strategies that conflict with one another [41], including both savoring strategies (attending to, enjoying, and extending positive emotional experiences [42]) and dampening strategies (minimizing positive emotional

experiences [42–44]). This pattern suggests that such individuals are using a haphazard approach to increase happiness, which is also unlikely to be successful. In sum, achieving happiness hinges on successful emotion regulation [10\*], but there are many ways in which this regulation can go awry.

#### How can monitoring happiness go awry?

Successful goal pursuit depends in part on monitoring one's progress. However, monitoring *happiness* goals can actually impede success, by directly interfering with one's hedonic experiences and by increasing the chances of experiencing negative emotions in response to a perceived lack of progress.

Several lines of research have found that merely monitoring a hedonic experience can interfere with that hedonic experience [45–48]. For example, individuals who were asked to monitor their happiness while listening to hedonically ambiguous music reported less happiness than those who did not monitor their happiness when listening [28\*\*].

Monitoring one's progress towards the happiness goal also sets the stage for negative meta-emotions: a negative emotional response to an original emotion (e.g., feeling disappointed about one's current level of happiness), which can further interfere with the experience of happiness [49]. Interestingly, having a negative emotional response to one's goal progress can be highly adaptive in many situations. Consider, for example, a goal to perform well in school: feeling disappointed in one's school grade does not directly interfere with the goal and can even motivate someone to achieve their goal. However, in the unique case of a positive emotional goal like happiness, a negative meta-emotion actually interferes with the possibility of reaching the goal [50]. Supporting this theory, previous research has found that people induced to value happiness (versus a control condition) experienced more disappointment about their feelings when watching a positive film clip, which in turn accounted for experiencing lower overall positive emotion [5\*\*]. Taken together, monitoring one's progress is necessary to gauge whether one's goal has been met, but monitoring processes can also work directly against the happiness goal.

Examining the components underlying the process of pursuing happiness helps clarify *when* and *why* the pursuit can backfire. To understand *for whom* this pursuit is most likely to backfire, we now integrate this process level of analysis with a trait level of analysis.

#### Two traits that shape the process of pursuing happiness

People likely differ in how they habitually approach the process of pursuing happiness [7,51,52]. Stable traits that

are relevant to the pursuit of happiness likely act as levers on the process of pursuing happiness, putting pressure on particular components and making it even more likely that certain components of the process go awry. Examining these traits could clarify the seemingly discrepant literatures showing that people who extremely value happiness are often less likely to achieve happiness but also that many people can successfully pursue happiness. Ultimately, considering how traits influence the process of pursuing happiness will highlight for whom the pursuit of happiness is particularly fraught, and for whom the pursuit might be successful.

We propose a novel conceptualization of two traits that should be highly relevant for whether and how people pursue happiness: Individuals likely differ in the extent to which they *aspire* to feel happy — they view happiness as a highly important goal — and the extent to which they are *concerned* about their happiness — they judge their feelings as good or bad depending on if their desired level of happiness is achieved. Preliminary work suggests that aspiring to happiness and concern about happiness can be reliably measured and that they do indeed show trait-like stability across time [51]. In theory, these two traits should influence the process of pursuing happiness in divergent ways, but much of the existing empirical work linking valuing happiness to worse outcomes has conflated these two traits. Thus, we must tease apart these traits to understand who is most at risk for unsuccessful pursuits of happiness and, ultimately, worse long-term outcomes.

We propose that the tendency to aspire to happiness adds pressure to the happiness goal by increasing the intensity or frequency of the happiness goal (see Figure 2). This increased pressure, however, need not necessarily translate into less happiness. Rather, the outcome of the emotional goal will hinge on the regulation strategies that someone implements. If an individual can recruit successful strategies (e.g., they prioritize positivity in their daily lives; [1<sup>+</sup>]), then their aspirations for happiness may indeed be met, but if an individual is unable to recruit successful strategies (e.g., they cannot pull themselves out of a negative mood; [10<sup>+</sup>]), their aspirations for happiness may backfire. The net effect of aspiring to feel happy may thus be relatively neutral on average — a finding supported by preliminary longitudinal research [51] — but also crucially moderated by people's ability to implement successful emotion regulation. Thus, the pursuit of happiness is likely not *inevitably* self-defeating if people have the right tools to achieve it.

We propose that the tendency to be concerned about happiness adds pressure to the meta-emotion component of the process by increasing the chances someone will experience a negative emotional response to their own progress (see Figure 2). These individuals are more likely

to be disappointed in their feelings while pursuing happiness, experiencing more negative emotion during the very moments where positivity is possible. As these moments of sabotaging their own happiness accumulate over time, they should experience worse well-being. Providing early evidence for this theory, preliminary longitudinal and daily-diary evidence suggests that people who were more concerned about happiness experienced more daily negative meta-emotions during positive events, which in turn accounted for worse longer-term well-being [51]. Therefore, concern about happiness seems to interfere with the pursuit of happiness when happiness is most within reach, and in turn, jeopardizes longer-term well-being.

### Moving forward

Next, we highlight some key areas for future research. An important next step involves thoroughly investigating the crucial interactions between processes and traits to build a comprehensive model of the pursuit of happiness. Such an endeavor would benefit from multi-method designs that include more granular methods (e.g., experience sampling, laboratory paradigms) to capture both the processes and the relevant traits at their appropriate temporal resolution.

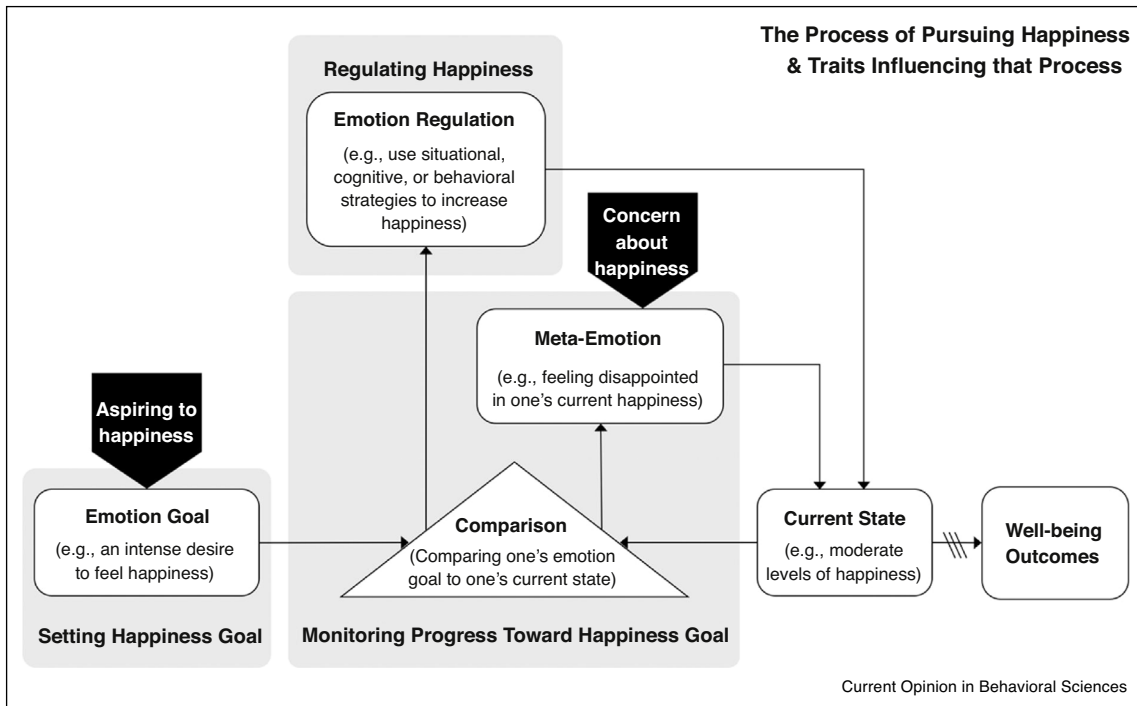
We considered many ways in which the pursuit of happiness can go awry. Fortunately, alternative approaches may avoid these pitfalls and promote a more successful pursuit of happiness [3,52,53]. A particularly useful intervention might focus on mindfulness practices to decrease the pressure of setting emotion goals [54] and decrease the likelihood of the particularly damaging meta-emotional experiences during the pursuit of happiness [55].

Finally, it will be highly fruitful to examine the proposed model from different sociocultural perspectives. For example, concern about happiness might decline throughout the lifespan because older individuals tend to accept their emotional experiences more and thus may engage in less monitoring processes [56]. Additionally, several studies show that the costs of pursuing happiness may be unique to Western cultural contexts, suggesting that culture plays a large role in the process of pursuing happiness and the traits that influence that pursuit [57–60].

### Concluding comment

Although happiness is a highly common and consequential goal, it appears that people who want to feel happy the most are often the least likely to achieve it. To address this paradox, it is necessary to consider how the process of pursuing happiness may go awry *and* how certain traits put pressure on this process, ultimately determining the outcome of pursuing happiness. Leveraging different levels of analysis, this nuanced approach clarifies who is most vulnerable to unsuccessful pursuits of happiness while also identifying potential

Figure 2



A cybernetic model of emotional goal pursuit (cf., Ref. [17]) applied to the pursuit of happiness that emphasizes how two traits (black boxes) might influence components of the process (highlighted in gray) where the pursuit can go awry and ultimately shape the short-term (current state) and long-term (well-being) outcomes of this pursuit.

processes to target for intervention to help these individuals have a better chance of attaining happiness and well-being.

### Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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